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Back to School: A Report on the Institute for Music Theory Pedagogy

BY JOHN CHECK

The inaugural Institute for Music Theory Pedagogy was held June 23–27, 2014 on the campus of the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, NY. The brainchild of Steven Laitz, the Institute drew fifty participants from twenty-two states along with Canada, Mexico, and Taiwan. These participants were affiliated with a variety of institutions: liberal arts colleges and regional comprehensive state universities, community colleges and major research institutions.

One of the main goals of the Institute was to begin to accord serious emphasis to the role of theory and aural skills *teaching*. In a time when money is tight and music programs must fight for every dollar they receive, a renewed commitment to teaching is essential. Exacerbating the problem of funding is that, more so than ever before, students enter college with limited preparation in the elements of music. Relatively few have studied piano, fewer music theory. Unsurprisingly, for many of these students, theory and aural skills classes become insuperable barriers: failing grades in these classes are often to blame (rightly or wrongly) for a student's decision to drop a major in music. (The Google search "Is music theory hard in college" leads to a distressing number of results.) No music program can long survive without a robust enrollment; this is why administrators concern themselves with student retention. A key to retention is strong teaching. Retention goes hand-in-hand with student success. And those programs that succeed in graduating students stand a better chance of maintaining their funding or, ideally, of having it increased.

If more and more music students enter college with limited understanding of the fundamentals, is it any wonder many of them fail to see the connection between analysis and performance? Is it any wonder they come to doubt the usefulness of their study of theory and aural skills? A second goal of the Institute was to equip teachers with an appreciation of the relevance of these subjects, to remind them of the implications arising from the close study of musical scores. In connection to this, I am reminded of the premises that guided Laitz in his textbook, *The Complete Musician*:

First, I believe students can learn to hear, comprehend, and model the structure and syntax of the music they love. Second, I hold the opinion that the same simple processes underlie all tonal music and that they are fleshed out in wondrously diverse ways. Third, I believe that students will rise to the challenge when all of their senses are stimulated and they are immersed in instrumental and vocal music from the tonal repertoire.

What I take from these premises is roughly this: Let students think that their work in theory or aural skills takes place in a vacuum, and you can be sure your efforts will be met with, at best, indifference.

A third goal of the Institute centered on the plight of non-specialists who, in order to fill out their teaching load, are assigned a section or two of theory or aural skills. Be they cellists or flutists, conductors or bassoonists, for them it is impractical to devote the time and attention necessary to acquire a specialist's command of music theory. All the same, they, too, must proceed with an eye toward retention and student success; they, too, need to become strong teachers, doubly so if they happen to be adjuncts: lacking the protection of tenure, they must continue to produce—and this means their students must succeed—otherwise they might find themselves unemployed. Then, too, this issue ought to be considered from the standpoint of the students: many of them will have standardized tests to pass if they are to achieve certification as a music educator. Should they go on to graduate school, they will most likely have an entrance exam to take: the better they know their theory and ear training, the more likely it is that they can avoid taking a remedial class. Whoever they learn their music theory from, it behooves them to learn it as well and as thoroughly as possible.

The underlying challenge—for Laitz the only challenge—is to *teach* as well as possible. To this end, he engaged an impressive faculty, all of them associated with Eastman, most as members of the theory department: William Marvin, Elizabeth West Marvin, Ted Goldman, John Covach, and Seth Monahan; Brian Alegant, who teaches at Oberlin, is an alumnus of Eastman, where he received a PhD. They were invited to participate because of their strong and shared commitment to the pedagogy of music theory and aural skills. Bill Marvin, a contributor to the *Journal of Music*

Theory Pedagogy, oversees the training of teaching assistants in the aural skills program at Eastman. Another contributor to the *JMTP*, Betsy Marvin is a co-author of *The Musician's Guide* series of textbooks. Goldman, an accomplished composer, pursues research interests in aural skills pedagogy and music perception. Covach, who works mainly in the discipline of popular music, has published, among other books, *What's That Sound? An Introduction to Rock Music*. Monahan, the author of a forthcoming book, *Mahler's Symphonic Sonatas* (Oxford University Press), has also contributed to *JMTP*. Alegant has written a number of articles on pedagogy and analysis, again several of which appear in the *JMTP*. Laitz, author of *The Complete Musician: An Integrated Approach to Theory, Analysis, and Listening*, Director of the Gail Boyd de Stwolinski Center for Music Theory Pedagogy at the University of Oklahoma, Executive Editor of *Music Theory Pedagogy Online*, is the outgoing editor of this journal. (Elizabeth Sayrs, of Ohio University, will expertly assume the role of Editor in Chief with Volume 29).

The Institute was structured so as to combine large-group lectures with small-group "breakout" sessions. The former, held on Monday and Tuesday and open to all participants, were each an hour long, with four lectures in the morning and three in the afternoon. Bill Marvin opened Monday's session with a lecture entitled "Developing Your Aural Musicianship Program," which took up broad ideas pertaining to curriculum and specific matters pertaining to music reading, dictation, singing, and keyboard harmonization. Betsy Marvin's presentation, "Developing an Undergraduate Core Curriculum," examined the many variables impinging on course design and individual class content. In "Technology in the Classroom: No Experience Required," Goldman delivered a fast-paced talk dealing with classroom technologies; the ease with which he maneuvered about the lecture room, tablet computer in hand, completely in control, was impressive. In "Pop Music in the Theory Classroom," Covach examined the challenges and opportunities of adding pop music to one's repository of teaching examples. Monahan's lecture, "Teaching Whole Pieces: Balancing Details with the Big Picture," dealt with the hardy problem of perspective: how to integrate minute observations into a more nearly comprehensive appreciation of an entire work or movement. In a talk entitled "Bringing it all Together: Model Composition," Laitz demonstrated his approach to the topic by leading volunteer participants at the chalkboard in front of the

lecture hall through the process of composing a short binary-form piece. Alegant, in "Thoughts on Designing a Post-tonal Aural Skills Course," provided insights into administering a demanding aural skills class, one emphasizing mastery and musicality, one in which students can feel an empowering sense of ownership.

In the interest of variety, the lecturers were largely scheduled at different times each day, with those who spoke in the morning Monday slated for the afternoon Tuesday. Betsy Marvin was first to speak; among other points, her lecture, "Building the Foundation: Teaching Fundamentals," highlighted the importance of contextual teaching, which calls for the use of actual compositions—for sounding music—for the conveyance of rudimentary concepts. Monahan spoke next; his presentation, "Making it Relevant: New Approaches to Species Counterpoint," sought to bring to life an abstract and remote-seeming subject, chiefly by showing the chordal implications of intervals when working on what he calls harmonic species counterpoint. In 'Linking Aural Skills Teaching to Perception and Performance,' Goldman outlined ways that students could get an A, yet have accidentally (or intentionally) bypassed acquiring the intended skill. He demonstrated ways to restructure typical aural skills activities that remedy this problem. Laitz's talk, "Tonal Improvisation in the Undergraduate Curriculum," concerned itself with the elaboration of simple musical structures, be they bass lines, figured basses, or outer-voice contrapuntal "skeletons"; elaboration and reduction—two activities that are often thought of as near opposites—were shown instead to be related symbiotically. Brian Alegant's "Intersections Between Analysis and Performance" addressed the way analytical observations—made at various level of consciousness—inform and influence a performer's interpretive practice. The piece under consideration was the Prelude from Bach's E-flat cello suite; among the interpretations were those of Yo-Yo Ma, Mischa Maisky, and Paolo Pandolfo. Bill Marvin, in "Linear Analysis in Core Undergraduate Training," made the case that Schenkerian analysis need not be incorporated into the core theory sequence, even though such a sequence, carefully constructed, provides an essential foundation for the study of this advanced subject. John Covach, in "MOOC Magic? Perils and Opportunities in Teaching Music Online," delivered a stimulating presentation examining the pros and cons of online education, a presentation supplemented by data that helped convey a picture of the kind of student who benefits most from this mode of instruction.

Unlike the lecture format of the first two days of the Institute, Wednesday through Friday featured small-group “breakout” sessions. The participants were divided into four groups of approximately a dozen each, with the individual groups attending up to three two-hour-long sessions per day. The relatively small size of each group allowed for a goodly amount of active participation and individualized attention. At Betsy Marvin’s breakout, participants were given the chance to make a five-minute presentation dealing with some topic of the fundamentals of music, one stipulation being that the topic be framed in relation to an actual piece of music. Each presentation was followed by a discussion of its strengths and weaknesses. At the session led by Bill Marvin, participants were assigned two sight-singing tasks, one in which they were put in the role of an instructor, the other in the role of a student. Again valuable feedback was given. Laitz’s breakout likewise dealt with classroom learning: given seven minutes, participants chose one of eleven possible activities to present, nearly all of them involving either improvisation or model composition. John Covach’s breakout centered on the use of rock music in the theory classroom; he brought home his points by demonstrating chords and riffs on his guitar. Goldman’s breakout focused on getting participants set up on their own portable electronic devices, mastering the basics so they could begin working with scores interactively in the classroom by the time they left. Monahan’s session concentrated on what he calls “piece-centered teaching” and used Schumann’s setting of Goethe’s “Heiss mich nicht reden” as a test case; he encouraged participants to explore ways they might make such a piece—one beyond the ken of all but the sharpest of beginning students—yield profitable analytical results.

Lest one assume that every moment of the Institute was occupied with music theory and its pedagogy, it ought to be emphasized that opportunities for socializing were abundant. The first of these came Sunday night, in the form of a reception in the atrium of the Hyatt Regency Rochester; it was then that Laitz welcomed the participants and introduced the members of the faculty. Throughout the week, faculty members and small groups of participants would often meet for lunch or sometimes supper. It was during these casual meetings that one picked up unsuspected bits of information about faculty members—about which one had a predilection for wearing garish ties or which one had a weakness for the stylings of sports-talk personality Jim Rome. Evening receptions were hosted off-campus

by Oxford University Press and W. W. Norton. Tours of the Sibley Music Library were given Wednesday through Friday. Thursday night a banquet for the participants (and significant others) was held at Veneto, a local favorite for pasta and wood-fired pizza and hosted by the Boston-based software company Noteflight. All during the week music resounded from the Xerox Rochester International Jazz Fest, at which over three hundred concerts were given in twenty venues throughout the city's East End.

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Participants were overwhelmingly positive in their evaluations of the Institute. The following comments, submitted anonymously, are representative:

- “Relevant and challenging topics, top notch faculty. This was the most intensive learning experience I’ve had since graduate school and it was great to be challenged.”
- “...it was a remarkable experience that has provided me with countless new teaching methods, many new colleague friends, and a re-energized passion for teaching!”
- “I enjoyed the workshops, especially the ones that emphasized participants actually teaching. These skills are immediately applicable even to teachers and TAs that might not be in position to influence curriculum design....”
- “The variety of topics was excellent—many issues in current pedagogical practice were deeply explored. The practical focus of each breakout session was invaluable and provided opportunities to learn, extend and develop techniques. The chosen repertoire was very relevant and the gamut of topics was wide and constructed with care.”
- “I’m simply amazed that all of the faculty were so supportive and encouraging with the participants. They genuinely seemed to care about each individual and their unique situation. They took the time to work with us (often one-on-one)—to listen to our concerns, diagnose our problems, and give constructive criticism and practical advice.”

Participants also offered suggestions for the future of the Institute: perhaps more attention could be given to post-tonal music or to instructional technologies; maybe a few more breaks could be worked into the schedule, so as to allow time to mentally process the wealth of information imparted in the sessions; possibly a session could be devoted to planning the overall

structure of a four-semester theory sequence.

The tight organization of the Institute came in for frequent praise: "This conference took time, effort, and financial investment on the part of the organizers," wrote one evaluator, "and all of it was greatly appreciated. Thanks to everyone who made this week a success." This sentiment was echoed by another participant, who perceptively noted, "I can't even begin to imagine how much time and work this must've taken."

I wanted to draw out a couple of my acquaintances for further impressions of the Institute. One of these was Philip Ewell, who teaches at Hunter College and the Graduate Center of City University of New York. When asked what he hoped to get from attending the Institute, he replied, "a better understanding of where things are in terms of current trends and best practices in the music theory and musicianship classrooms. Some of my favorite conversations at theory conferences," he continued, "are those that deal with what we do in the classroom. So it was really nice to have a week to think just of that, without other distractions." I posed the same question to Renee Waters, who teaches at Southwest Baptist University in Bolivar, MO. Her reply: "We are updating the theory curriculum at my institution, so I was particularly interested in current trends and goals for an undergraduate core curriculum (including texts and other course materials). I have to say, the Institute far exceeded my hopes and expectations."

Ewell wrote me that he found "the atmosphere was quite collegial and nurturing." He added that he thought it a particularly good idea that Laitz asked participants to bring their instruments to his breakout session: "it's worth the time and effort." Waters, meanwhile, wrote that "I have already applied many of the ideas and suggestions we discussed at the Institute, and I can report that my students have greatly benefited as a result of my experiences. Personally," she added, "this was one of the most helpful and enriching experiences of my teaching career. I offer my sincere thanks to the faculty for their role in providing us with such a relevant, incredibly well-organized experience."

The most direct way I have of indicating the quality and intensity of the Institute for Music Theory Pedagogy is by relating my experience at one of the breakout sessions, Brian Alegant's presentation on atonal aural skills. A dozen of us participants gathered in a small classroom on the seventh floor of the Eastman School of Music annex building. As a warm-up activity, clusters of

notes were played at the piano and we were asked to identify their scalar or modal basis. Next we worked on “The Cage” by Charles Ives. With Alegant either seated at the piano or standing and keeping us in time, we performed the melody, each of us singing one note before passing the phrase on to our neighbor in the oval in which we had assembled. Another challenge was provided by a section of “Pour Luigi” by Philippe Hurel. Here our task was to perform the rhythm—no easy feat. The goal, to borrow a word of Alegant’s, was nothing short of “ownership.” Still another activity centered on cross rhythms. Together, in small groups, and individually we were encouraged to perform—using our voices and tapping our hands—combinations of various metric divisions—threes against fours, fours against fives, and so on. The time flew by, and only afterward did I realize how much effort I had expended in trying to keep up.

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Writing in tribute to Will Strunk, the original author of *The Elements of Style*, E. B. White, his onetime student, observed, “It is encouraging to see how perfectly a book . . . perpetuates and extends the spirit of a man.” The same sentiment applies, I believe, to the Institute for Music Theory Pedagogy and its founder, Steven Laitz. Little more than a year ago, on a visit to the school where I teach, he said something that has stayed with me: “In the time I have left, I want to do all I can to improve the way we teach music theory.” The Institute extends an invitation to all of us to make this worthy endeavor our own.